



Women in the artistic professions: Contribution of sociology to the analysis of the processes of “social closure”

Magali Danner

► To cite this version:

Magali Danner. Women in the artistic professions: Contribution of sociology to the analysis of the processes of “social closure” . 27th International Labour Process Conference “Work Matters”, Apr 2009, Edinburgh, Unknown Region. hal-01389691

HAL Id: hal-01389691

<https://hal.science/hal-01389691>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Women in the artistic professions:

Contribution of sociology to the analysis of the processes of “social closure”

M. Danner

Introduction

This research focuses on independent professionals in France. Workers in France are classified as independent professionals if they do not work as salaried employees or are self-employed. The labour market of independent professionals commonly includes two different kinds of professions: those that require specific conditions for access and those that are freely accessed. The former constitute a ‘closed’ labour market, whereas the latter make up a so-called ‘open’ labour market.

Survey methodology

Survey 1: the data provided by the INSEE job surveys helps to monitor a given population over the course of several years. For the purposes of this research, only first-time participants were surveyed over a period of three consecutive years (2003, 2004 and 2005), i.e. 169 886 subjects. Of these, 4274 worked as independent professionals.

Professions offering limited access include highly regulated sectors such as health care, the law and consultancy, which require specific State-recognized titles and qualifications. The length and cost of studies required to enter these professions explain why they are commonly practised by individuals from privileged socio-economic backgrounds. Beyond the matter of *legal* closure, independent professions operating as closed labour markets are therefore also governed by a form of *social* closure (Weber, 1995). This particular feature of the labour market ensures certain

privileges, such as the admiration of the profane, a degree of freedom and high levels of income.

In comparison with these highly regulated professions, access to other independent professions (such as agriculture, arts and crafts, business, artistic professions and other non-regulated professions) is relatively open (Paradeise, 1988). These professions tend increasingly to require specific qualifications, but the level of these qualifications is still relatively low and may be compensated by a degree of professional experience. Qualifications in these professions are therefore not *sine qua non* conditions of access.

The table below provides a clear illustration of the contrast between open and closed labour markets in independent professions: 32% of independent workers in open markets have no qualifications at secondary level, as opposed to just 3% of independent workers operating on closed labour markets. In the case of workers with higher education qualifications, the proportions are respectively 15% and 89%.

Table 1: Inequality of positions in professional labour markets

Specificities of the market	Profession	N	Level of study		% children of managers	Annual income before	
			No secondary education	Higher education		[0 €-10000 €]	[35000 € and +]
Open market	Agriculture and livestock farming	1172	34	9	1	45 %	5 %
	Arts and crafts	900	28	8	6	29 %	8 %
	Business	758	38	14	7	41 %	7 %
	Artistic professions	229	18	51	31	41 %	12 %
	Other professions	357	32	26	12	35 %	10 %
	Average	3414	32	15		39 %	7 %
Closed market	Health care	532	2	94	24	8 %	44 %
	Law	51	0	100	28	4 %	54 %
	Consultancy	172	8	73	25	23 %	24 %
	Average	755	3	89		11 %	40 %

Because of the elitism that it implies and the absence of competition which it guarantees, the level of training required for accessing closed markets partly justifies the high levels of income within these professions. More than 50% of people working in these professions earn on average more than 15 000 € per annum, whereas workers in open markets earn significantly less – 39% earn less than 10 000 € per annum. More radically still, the proportion of individuals declaring high levels of income, i.e.

above 35 000 €, is significantly higher in closed markets (40%) than it is in open markets (7%).

The impact of ‘social closure’ on the artistic professions

Using this analytical framework, the case of the artistic professions require a specific examination: workers in this area, who tend to be socially and educationally privileged, share far more in common with workers in the regulated sectors of health care, the law and consultancy than with other non-regulated professions, as indicated by the table above. Unlike the case of regulated professions, however, the qualifications obtained in this area are not by any means a guarantee of effective employment. Qualifications are not a criterion of access or advancement in artistic professions, which rely more generally on reputation and integration within established networks that ensure visibility and recognition. The effect of informal advancement by successive integrations within networks connecting individuals, which ensures increased recognition, is a pyramidal structure with, at its summit, the ‘winner-takes all markets’, which enjoy high levels of income, and at its base, the imposing mass of anonymous and penniless artists (Frank et Cook, 1995). To this extent, it is not merely that professional recognition is not conditioned by qualifications in this particular market, since it is also the case that individuals with qualifications are not granted a legal monopoly in their occupation, which would help to protect anonymous artists from significant competition from amateurs, volunteers and other individuals who engage in the same activities as non-professionals.

However, although average income levels tend to be low despite high qualifications (see table 1), these artistic professions, let hope for considerably high profits. In addition, artistic professions, like all professions, enjoy nonetheless a degree of prestige in society that clearly sets them apart from other professions governed by open markets. The issues involved in closing these professions to any form of competition are thereby exacerbated.

To this extent, artistic professions constitute a fruitful object of study for the analysis of the informal exercise of social control over the process of market closure. A specific population, i.e. women, was selected to study this particular aspect of the

issue. Since they now constitute the majority of students taking art subjects in schools and universities, women represent a genuine and potentially competitive work force in a profession that defined itself for centuries exclusively in terms of male thought patterns and forms of recognition.

Women represent only a third of independent professionals (32%). On the face of it, it may seem surprising to find so few women in the artistic professions (38%) despite the fact that so many women choose to study art-related subjects at secondary school and in higher education: at secondary level, women account for 79% of students opting for art-related optional subjects, and in higher education, subjects such as art, drama, architecture, dance and music are also heavily subscribed by female students.

Table 2: Rate of feminization in art subjects

		Rate of feminization
Higher education	Art options in secondary schools	79%
University training	Institutes of plastic arts and applied arts (=57)	63%
	Music and dance schools (=25)	55%
	Architecture schools (=20)	51%
	Theatre and performing arts schools (=12)	49%
	Film and broadcasting studies (=1)	43%
Private education	Conservatoires in music, dance and drama	59% <i>Precisely 56% in music, 92% in dance and 65% in drama</i>
	National institutes of music (which also offer training in dance and drama)	59%

There are very few women in the artistic professions (painting: 37%, writing: 27%, music: 17%, film directing: 34%, singing: 47%, dancing: 68%), and even fewer with the status of author.

- The AGESEA – the organisation that manages social security issues for professional authors, including writers, authors and composers, and professionals in cinema, television, and photography – notes that just 31% of its affiliated author-artists are women.
- Likewise, the *Maison des Artistes*, which manages royalties for graphic and plastic artists, observe that just 40% of its members are women.

Processes of social closures affecting women

How might we account for this relatively low proportion of female authors in the artistic professions? This paper will consider three intimately connected and mutually reinforcing explanatory factors:

- The historical context;
- The social context;
- Processes of self-selection.

In Antiquity, Aristotle distinguished the noble arts (the arts of language and numbers) from the servile arts practised by slaves (such as painting, architecture, sculpture, instrumental music, but also agriculture, carpentry, pottery and weaving). In the Middle Ages, the distinction barely evolved, although artists and craftsmen began to constitute guilds. However, because of the strict regulation of the labour market by guilds and corporations, some workers became emancipated from these bonds by founding their own organisations or by soliciting the protection of a powerful patron. In parallel, keen to increase his prestige and influence, the King founded the first Academies in the seventeenth century and granted a new status to artists who had chosen to operate independently of guilds and corporations. Artists in the Academies were intellectuals and scholars, and were drawn from the uppermost classes of the social hierarchy (Darriulat, 2007). The realm of artistic creation thus underwent a first ideological conversion that ensured the social recognition of an intellectual activity that had been previously regarded as a manual occupation: creation was now construed as the production of essentially symbolic goods and the profession was no longer governed by necessity but became instead a vocation. In France, this ideology contributed to the elevation of the arts and to a distinct separation of artistic activities from the realm of manual labour (Sapiro, 2007).

These historical shifts in the profession were accompanied by cultural upheavals that did nothing to serve the interests of women. Women had always taken an active part in artistic activities. Since Antiquity, they had played musical instruments or created art works. In the Middle Ages, artists were still viewed as craftsmen and their

corporations included both men and women, especially in music, weaving and embroidery. In convents, many women also contributed to the production of miniature illuminations and works of writing. Yet history has forgotten the names of the female artists who worked in the complete anonymity of workshops or who gave up their maiden name to adopt their husband's surname. Since the supports they used for their work were fragile materials, very few of their works have withstood the test of time. The dark era of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was marked by the virulence of religious precepts and considerably diminished women's sphere of activity. In the Renaissance, because women tended to be excluded by the regulations of many guilds, traditional occupations were gradually reclaimed by men. In sixteenth-century France, married women became legally incapable and the dominant view was that women should devote their lives to their children and their husband. The role of women as irreproachable mothers remained uncontested until the middle of the twentieth century.

Production constraints in agriculture, arts and crafts, and commerce enabled women to remain present on these markets to sustain activity, though it was men who commonly adopted the couple's professional identity (Battagliola, 2000). By contrast, the realm of artistic creation appealed more commonly to autonomous activities that involved the production of original work. This social position was difficult to maintain for women because it was a socially costly process for them to claim professional independence through the solitary exercise of an activity that was reserved exclusively for men and that was incompatible with their role as good wives and mothers (Heinich, 1993). Furthermore, painters and sculptors were not allowed to own a shop and to sell works other than their own in the name of disinterestedness and self-denial. Yet because they had little or no recognition on the art market, female artists struggled to earn a living from their work. Furthermore, the creation of the Academies, which had become sacred high places of artistic creation, did nothing to encourage women's access to these professions. Indeed, very few women were allowed to benefit from such training, unless they were from wealthy families or from a lineage of artists (Sofio, 2007). In other words, by elevating artistic activity into a liberal art, the professional realm was defined in parallel without the presence of women.

A historical approach to the issue provides crucial elements for understanding the conditions that governed the emergence and structure of professional realms, particularly the processes of closure determining the professional assertion of female artists. Forms of social closure in markets originating in the seventeenth century structured the field on a long-term basis, and so it was exclusively men who occupied the most prestigious and enviable positions. This partly explains why the functions of judge, art critic, producers, etc. were traditionally held by men proffering their judgements from the standpoint of a 'male sociodicy'. In other words, interactions between individuals were governed in such a way that they served to maintain an organized social order determined by gender differences that gave rise in particular to internal processes of professional segmentation. It has been demonstrated that in traditionally male-dominated professions which became gradually feminised though without being devalued as a result, women had neither the same functions nor the same status as men (Goffman, 2002).

Furthermore, beyond this historical and social context, common cultural representations have also served to shape conventional perceptions of artworks produced by women. With the first 'ideological conversion', the figure of the artist in popular belief emerged as a hypersensitive, tortured, illuminated and disavowed being standing before the crowds in the immensity of his solitude, in a state of self-denial, a Christ-like figure serving as a sacrificial offering by way of elevating the community to enlightenment (Heinich, 2005). Yet this state of supernatural grace destined for a handful of elects was rarely bestowed upon women to the point of establishing them as charismatic leaders. Though often talented, women have only very rarely been represented as geniuses (Nochlin, 1971). By way of illustration, Brenot (1997), who has addressed the close connection between genius and creative madness, includes just twenty or so women amid approximately 400 references in total. This minimalist conception of the creative potentialities of women remains a salient feature of our current cultural context and of the social representations of the quality of artworks by female artists (Sofio, 2007). Because they alone are able to access genius, men have acquired the right to delegate what Hughes calls the 'dirty works' to the rest of the (uninitiated) population (Hughes, 1971). Since they are barely recognized in elite circles, women are thereby compelled to choose between renouncing their practice or accepting subordinate or less prestigious positions such as salaried employment.

From selection to self-selection

A second survey, relating this time to qualified workers, was carried out in order to extend this theoretical analysis and to provide evidence for the claim that female artists tend to withdraw from the most prestigious careers in the arts.

Survey methodology

Survey 2: Of the 169 886 individuals included in the INSEE job survey, 5610 chose to specialise in art, communication or information studies as part of their training towards their final qualification.

Despite their specialised qualifications, women are more likely to be unemployed than men (45% as opposed to 34% of men). Furthermore, if they have secured employment, female workers are less frequently positioned in managerial positions or in intellectual professions (respectively 16% and 30%), and women trained in these areas are fewer in numbers in occupations relating to information, the arts and the performing arts (respectively 6% and 15%). Of those women who had secured jobs in these areas, just 8% stated that they worked in an artistic or journalistic profession as an author (painting, writing, music, acting, dancing...) as opposed to 16% of men. As for the issue of income levels – and this is particularly the case of jobs in information, the arts and the performing arts – women also earn less than men: 50% of women earn more than 15 000 € as opposed to 60% of men.

The decision to pursue studies in these areas does not therefore provide the same professional guarantees for men and women, which only serves to reinforce the hypothesis of a lesser competitive advantage for the latter if they choose to pursue independent careers in intellectual and artistic professions, in spite of their specialist training in the area.

Despite being massively present in art subjects, there are relatively few women who find employment in the area, especially in the case of creator-authors. Is it possible to highlight women's withdrawal from these professional markets at the very outset of their careers?

On the face of it, this particular research issue is not easy to address in so far as becoming an artist does not require any specific training, unlike professions in closed markets. Self-teaching remains positively valued in this particular sector, with artists going so far as to omit deliberately from their CV their artistic education or any additional training based on work experience. However, artistic offer has considerably developed in teaching and has created many vocations. Many students from these particular courses envisage pursuing their studies at a higher, postgraduate level. For students who decide to further their artistic skills and knowledge, it appears that the longer they pursue their studies, the keener they become to establish a coherent relation between their educational training and their targeted job. The present study will consider one of the highest levels that can be attained in artistic training. The selection process for entering a French Art Schools (*Ecole d'Art*) is based on admission by a panel of graduates of the secondary education which, three years later, grants students the right to pursue their studies at a higher level (two further years of study). The length of the course and the rigour of the selection process are designed to ensure a high standard of education and training.

Survey methodology

Survey 3: A specific analysis of individuals with qualifications from art schools consisted of monitoring a cohort of 773 students graduating in June 2005 (the near totality of new graduates). Students were interviewed 18 to 36 months after graduation.

The rate of female employment is significantly lower than it is for men, with 62% of women having secured employment 18 months after graduation as opposed to 68% of men. Of those who had secured employment, 49% of male graduates worked as

independent artists as opposed to just 32% of female graduates. When they opted to work as independent artists, women were less likely than men to work as plastic artists: 31% of women had become plastic artists as opposed to 37% of men. The differences were even more pronounced in the second survey: three years after graduating, the plastic artist/independent artist ratio was 30% for women and 49% for men.

Women appear to be less visible and less integrated in networks promoting reputation and recognition. There are two kinds of independent artists: plastic artists and commissioned artists (designers, graphic designers, essentially). The survey indicates that 36 months after graduation male plastic artists had performed on average 10 exhibitions since graduating, as opposed to just 4 exhibitions for their female counterparts. Male plastic artists also exhibit their work more frequently than women in art galleries, salons and museums, high places of artistic recognition, be they plastic artists (53% as opposed to 36% of women) or designers/graphic designers (33% as opposed to 0%). Male graduates had also taken part more frequently in competitions: this was the case for 79% of male plastic artists compared to 58% of female plastic artists, and 53% of male designers/graphic designers as opposed to just 33% of female designers/graphic designers. Finally, women claimed they were slightly less integrated in professional networks: 75% of female plastic artists as opposed to 79% of male plastic artists, while just 33% of women produced commissioned work, as opposed to 60% of men.

A second indicator revealing the unequal correspondence between training and employment in art school graduates is designed to establish how men and women tend to promote their skills in salaried employment. In this market, women enjoy a greater sense of stability and less precarity. However, this is achieved at the cost of a degree of resignation since women also stated that they were less frequently required to use their artistic skills than their male counterparts. 36 months after graduation, a significantly higher proportion of male graduates had secured jobs that enabled them to promote their artistic skills (82% of men as opposed to 57% of women).

The same observation also applies in the private realm, where female workers are fewer in numbers than their male counterparts. 18 months after graduation, fewer

women stated that part of their leisure time was devoted to pursuing their artistic activities as amateurs (on average 64 hours per month as opposed to 88 hours for men). These differences were shown to be greater still in the second survey since women stated that they devoted very little time to such pursuits (49 hours) in comparison with their male counterparts (97 hours). Female respondents were also less likely (22%) to have a work space or studio at their disposal than male respondents (39%). Beyond the issue of artistic practice, there are also significant differences in the capacity of male and female artists to promote their work. Thus, women stated that they felt less integrated than men in a relational network that was liable to help promote their work (respectively 41% and 55%). Whereas the situation of women in this respect had barely changed 18 months later, the situation of their male counterparts had considerably improved, with 61% of male respondents claiming they felt well integrated within relational networks as opposed to just 42% of women. Women were also less likely to receive remuneration from sales of their work (16% as opposed to 20% respectively), and where earnings were obtained, these tended to be lower on average for women (188 € for women as opposed to 313 € for men). Women exhibited their work four times throughout the 36-month period after graduation whereas men exhibited their work roughly 6 times throughout the same period.

Discussion

An ideology may be defined as a specific set of beliefs held at a given moment within a group or society that is liable to shape individual or collective behaviour. The advent of the artistic professions in the professional domain served effectively to exclude women from the realm of artistic creation and to provide a system of representation and explanation of artistic genius that has remained critically unchallenged by society at large. This is illustrated by the fact that the greatest chefs, painters, choreographers, composers and stylists are still embodied by predominantly male figures in collective representations. The strength of an ideology is to provide subjects with an account of their situation that spares them from having to question the prevailing order of things (Suaud, 1978). The tendency of female artists to avoid the most prestigious careers in spite of a high level of specialisation in these areas is a

good indication of the extent to which this ideology continues to exert its hold over the realm of artistic creation.

Following the ‘first ideological conversion’, artist in popular belief is crossed of the status of manual worker to that of intellectual and slave's rank in that of genius. In this conversion, cultural evolutions of the society moved away the woman from the artistic creation which had the effect of linking genius to masculine faces. These social representations on the creative potentialities of the women continue influencing judgements on their productions and restrict their progression of this fact always in networks.

The ideology of vocations is still highly relevant in the age of equal opportunities, particularly because it is increasingly relegated by socialising institutions. Entrusted with the task of identifying, training and channelling the ‘new vocations’, these institutions are increasingly attracting an ever growing number of candidates to the profession who wish to complete formal training courses as part of their artistic education (Salamero, 2008). The power of these institutions to confer status and recognition thus helps the myth to endure all the more efficiently since they have undergone a second ‘ideological conversion’ by replacing the pseudo-religious obscurantism of specialist training courses with certifications and rhetorical practices that promote a meritocratic ideal. However, these degree-awarding institutions have in no way resolved the issue of the dual conception of society that opposes male and female activities.

This explains why, in spite of the high rates of feminisation in art-based courses, there are still fewer women than men in the most prestigious artistic careers. The surveys used for this study (INSEE and art schools) show that these courses entail a high degree of risk for women in so far as they are more likely to be seeking employment after graduation than their male counterparts. In cases where they have secured a job, women are more likely to be positioned in salaried employment, which also means that they are more likely to refrain from promoting their artistic skills in their professional occupation. In the case of independent professions, women appear to be less integrated socially in networks that favour the promotion of their work, thus limiting the likelihood that they are able to gain recognition on the art scene. Finally,

in the realm of non-professional activities, women also appear to be less likely to gain recognition on the art market.

Therefore, the crucial factor in the differentiation of men and women still remains the recognition of their skills and their capacity to integrate networks promoting reputation and visibility on the social capital market, more than their opportunities for accessing the profession itself. These cultural obstacles and this lack of control over social relations partly explain why women choose not to pursue the most prestigious artistic careers – a retreat that is all the more remarkable that having long been excluded from the institutions of artistic education, women are now over-represented in these institutions.

Thus, far from disappearing as a result of the various feminist and democratic movements in western societies, these elite professions continue to operate a segmentation of the market in such a way that women occupy an unequally advantageous position in comparison with their male counterparts. Female artists are thus confronted not merely with a form of vertical segregation since they are less likely to access the highest levels of valuation than men, but they are also faced with a form of horizontal segregation insofar as they tend to opt out of professional activities where they must face more difficulties to assert themselves. In other words, while there is a ‘glass ceiling’ preventing them from establishing themselves as recognised artists, women also tend to come up against a ‘glass wall’.

While it may call for a reflection on a wider theoretical context including in particular the so-called vocational professions, the analysis of artistic professions primarily provides an opportunity for studying the processes of withdrawal of a group whose acquired rights are threatened by the active demands of an emerging group. Besides its demystification of ‘guilty knowledge’ (Hughes, 1971), the rising level of knowledge in modern societies increasingly threatens the legitimacy of occupational groups defined as professions which, in view of the specific nature of their activities, are also likely to be practised by non-professionals. In a vulgarised labour market already open to all forms of competition, the presence of women as a group that is both socially coherent and extensive is only likely to reinforce the protectionist tendencies of those who had previously struggled to establish their hold over the same

market. Far from being designed as a critical exposure of any form of domination of one gender by another, this research illustrates instead the social response operated by disparate and atomised individuals who come together to react as 'professional bodies' in the face of a threat that is itself constituted as a social body.

Franck, R. and Cook, P. (1995). *The Winner-Take-All Society*, The Free Press, New York.

Darriulat, J. (2007), *Introduction à la philosophie esthétique : De l'Académie au Salon*, Actes de conférences, texte disponible sur <http://www.jdarriulat.net/Introductionphiloesth/index.html>

Brenot, P. (1997), *Le génie et la folie, en peinture, musique et littérature*, Paris, Odile Jacob.

Battagliola, F. (2000), *Histoire du travail des femmes*. Paris, éd. La Découverte, Coll. Repères

Goffman, E. (2002), *L'arrangement des sexes*, Paris, La Dispute

Heinich, N. (1993), *Du peintre à l'artiste, artisans et académiciens à l'âge classique*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit.

Heinich, N. (2005), *L'Elite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique*, Gallimard, Paris.

Hughes, E.C. 1971 – « Professional and Career problems of sociology », in *The Sociological Eye, Selected papers*, Chicago and New-York, Aldine-Atheton, pp. 464-472.

Nochlin, L. (1971) "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews January* : 22-39, 67-71.

Paradeise, C. (1988), « Les professions comme marchés du travail fermés », *Sociologie et sociétés*, n°2, pp. 9-21.

Salamero, E. (2006), « Trajectoires et carrières féminines dans le monde du cirque contemporain », *actes du congrès de l'Association Française de Sociologie*.

Sapiro, G. (2007), « La vocation artistique entre don et don de soi », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 168, pp. 4-11.

Sofio, S. (2007 « La vocation comme subversion : artistes femmes et anti-académisme dans la France révolutionnaire », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n°168, pp. 34-49.

Suaud, C. (1978), *La vocation. Conversion et reconversion des prêtres ruraux*. Paris, Les éditions de Minuit.

Weber, M. (éd. orig. 1922, trad. fr. 1971, rééd. 1995), *Économie et société*, Plon, Paris.